Haiti

Location

Haiti is located on the western one-third of the island Hispaniola, in the Caribbean. Its borders touch the Caribbean Sea, the North Atlantic Ocean and the Dominican Republic, which covers the other two-thirds of Hispaniola. The coordinates of Haiti are 19 00 N latitude and 72 25 W longitude. The area of Haiti is 27,750 square kilometers, which is slightly smaller than the state of Maryland.

Geography

Haiti is very mountainous and rough. The elevation ranges from 0 meters at the Caribbean Sea to 2,680 meters at Chaine de la Selle (World Factbook).

Climate

Haiti is mainly tropical. The mountains on the eastern side of the country cut off the trade winds, causing the climate to be semi-arid. Haiti is located in the middle of the hurricane belt. This brings hurricanes and tropical storms to the island from June to October. There are also occasional floods, earthquakes, and droughts.

History

The first known inhabitants of Haiti were the Arawaks. These people gave the island the name Haiti, which means “land of mountains.” In 1492, Columbus and his men arrived in Haiti, believing they had reached India. They called the inhabitants of the island Indians and the island itself, Hispaniola, meaning Little Spain. The Arawak people were almost completely wiped out by disease, forced slavery, and execution by the Spanish. The western part of the island, which is now Haiti, was largely ignored for the better land of the east, which is the modern-day Dominican Republic. This left the western side of the island for French and English buccaneers to settle.

In the 17th century, French colonists developed sugar plantations in northern Haiti. The French imported African slaves for labor, making the population of Haiti mostly black.
In 1697, Spain gave up its hold on Haiti to France. With very high sugar and coffee production, Haiti proved to be one of France’s most valuable colonies. At this time, the population of Haiti was made up of Frenchmen, Creoles, mulattos (mixed), freed blacks, and black slaves. The mulattos, who had an uncertain social status, revolted when their representation was blocked in the local and French governments. Around the same time, a former slave, Toussaint L’Ouverture, mobilized the blacks into guerrilla bands. An English invasion in 1793 caused the blacks and mulattos to join forces. In 1801, Toussaint conquered part of the island. As self-proclaimed governor, Toussaint abolished slavery. Unable to restore order to the island of Hispaniola, the French agreed to a peace treaty. Toussaint was captured by trickery and died in a French prison. However, the revolt continued and forced the French to withdraw. Haiti gained its independence on January 1, 1804. It was only the second country in the Western Hemisphere to do so.

With new Haitian independence, all French and Creole settlers were forced to leave the country. Jean-Jacques Dessalines became the self-proclaimed emperor. Two years later, his assassination led to a division of the country. The blacks controlled the north under the leadership of Emperor Henri Christophe and the south was controlled by the mulattos, with President Alecandre Petion in charge. The death of these two men led to a unification of Haiti under Jean Pierre Boyer. Boyer severely hurt Haiti by trying to help French planters. This led to his expulsion in 1843. Faustin Soulouque became the last emperor of Haiti. With his death in 1859, Haiti became a republic. However, political and social conflict did not end and Haiti’s economy, still hurting from the war for independence, only got worse.

A popular uprising in 1915 caused the death of the current dictator, Guillaume Sam. At this time, the United States was very concerned about the possibility of Germany seizing control of Haiti, as well as its property and investments in Haiti. The U.S. government used the death of the dictator as reason to take control of Port-au-Prince. Under U.S. control, the Haitian congress was dissolved.
and a new constitution was written. Although the Haitian economy strengthened under the U.S. occupancy, the people of Haiti wanted their freedom back. In 1930, Haiti was allowed to elect a legislature. This legislature would then have the power to name a president. The legislature chose Stenio Vincent, who was very opposed to the U.S. occupation. The U.S. troops pulled out of Haiti in 1934.

The new government was not able to curb the political instability. A new president elected in 1957, Francois Duvalier, formed the paramilitary police to suppress any opposition to his government. Duvalier proclaimed himself president for life. His son, Jean-Claude, became president upon his death in 1971. After 15 years in office, a popular uprising upset with the corruption, repression, and inequality finally forced Jean-Claude Duvalier out of office.

After the Duvalier reign ended in 1986, several attempts were made to form a democracy. These civilian efforts were all ended quickly by military coups. In 1991, Jean-Bertand Aristide became the first freely elected president in Haitian history, but in just nine months was forced to flee to the United States. As a result of yet another failed attempt at democracy, the United States and the Organization of American States placed a trade embargo on Haiti. An oil embargo was also enforced in 1993 by the United Nations. Violence in Haiti stopped any attempts to restore Aristide to presidency.

In 1994, the United Nations placed a nearly total trade embargo on Haiti and authorized the use of force in order to quell the violence preventing any political peace. Under the threat of attack, the military leaders ruling Haiti gave up their power and allowed Aristide to return to the presidency. Overseen by U.S. troops and U.N. peacekeepers, a presidential election in 1995 named Rene Preval as Aristide’s successor. Disagreements with the Haitian legislators in 1999 caused Preval to severe his ties with the legislative branch and begin ruling by decree.

Aristide was again elected president in 2000, under accusations of false voting methods and harassment of opposition and journalists. The political conflict did not stop. In 2001, another attempt
to overthrow Aristide occurred, but it was unsuccessful. As a result of the tumultuous political state of Haiti, foreign aid was suspended and Haiti’s economy only continued to worsen.

Continued political conflict in 2003 led to the dissolution of the Haitian parliament, Aristide ruling by decree, anti-Aristide demonstrations, and an armed uprising. Under pressure from foreign governments in February 2004, Aristide resigned and went into exile for the second time. Foreign troops entered Haiti to restore order and set up an interim government. This brought pressure from The Caribbean Community, who refused to recognize the new prime minister or readmit Haiti until a democratically elected government was in place. Elections were delayed several times due to violence, but finally occurred in February 2006. Rene Preval was again elected president. Aristide supporters and the opposition continue to be at odds and lawlessness is still a problem, even with the presence of foreign peace keepers.

Aside from the political turmoil Haiti has faced, the country has also had some natural disasters in recent years. In 2004, flooding killed 1,700 people in May. Just four months later, 2,500 more people were killed from flooding resulting from Tropical Storm Jeanne.

**Important Dates**

Official Holidays:

- January 1: Independence Day
- January 2: Ancestors’ Day
- May 1: Agriculture and Labor Day
- May 18: Flag and University Day
- October 17: Anniversary of the Death of Jean-Jacques Dessalines
- October 24: United Nations Day
- November 1: All Saints Day
- November 2: All Souls Day
- November 18: Battle of Vertieres Day
December 25: Christmas Day

Legal/Religious/Traditional Holidays:

Carnival (Monday through Ash Wednesday)

Good Friday

Pan-American Day: April 14

Ascension Thursday

Feast of the Assumption

Corpus Christi (National Holidays)

Population

Haiti is home to 8,121,622 people (2005 estimate). The population is growing at a rate of 2.26% a year. The birth rate is 36.59 births / 1,000 people. The country has a very high infant mortality rate. There are 73.45 deaths for every 1,000 live births. Life expectancy at birth is 52.92 years. The death rate in Haiti is 12.34 deaths / 1,000 people. This death rate could be due in part to the large amount of AIDS/HIV in the country. Five point six percent of the adult population is living with HIV/AIDS, which is about 280,000 people. The net migration rate in Haiti is -1.68 / 1,000 people. The ethnic background of the Haitian population is 95% black and 5% white and mulatto (mixed).

Currency

The currency of Haiti is the gourde. The exchange rate of the gourde was 38.352 gourdes to one US dollar in 2004. This is lower than the 42.367 gourdes to one US dollar rate in 2003, but still higher than the 29.251 gourdes to one US dollar rate in 2002. This high exchange rate is most likely due to the political unrest and economic instability of the last few years.

Education

The literacy rate of Haiti, or the percent of the population age 15 and older that can read, is 52.9%. The literacy rate for males is only slightly higher than the female literacy rate. They are 54.8%
and 51.2%, respectively. This suggests that women have nearly equal education opportunities as men.

**Language**

Haiti has two official languages, French and Creole.

**Religion**

Eighty percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Another 16% of the population is Protestant, while 3% is other religions, and 1% does not claim any religion. Despite this Christian majority, about half the population also practices Voodoo.

**Government**

The Republic of Haiti, which is the official name of the country, has an elected government. The capital city is Port-au-Prince. The Haitian flag has two equal bands of red and blue. A white rectangle is centered in the middle. In the rectangle is a coat of arms featuring a palm tree with three flags and a cannon on either side. Below the palm tree is a scroll with the words “Union Makes Strength”.

**Agriculture**

Arable land is scarce in Haiti. Twenty eight point three percent of the land is arable. This is a very small amount of land, considering that two-thirds of the Haitian people depend on agriculture. The agriculture sector is mainly comprised of small subsistence farms. Farming is very primitive; plowing with oxen and planting by hand are very common. Eleven point sixty one percent of the land is dedicated to permanent crops, such as forests. Seven hundred and fifty square kilometers of land in Haiti are irrigated. The main agriculture products raised in Haiti are: coffee, mangoes, sugarcane, rice, corn, sorghum, and wood. Haiti also has some natural resources: bauxite, copper, calcium carbonate, gold, marble, and hydropower. Some of the issues facing Haitian agriculture are: deforestation, soil erosion, and a lack of potable water.
Trade

The majority of Haiti’s exports go to the United States, the Dominican Republic, and Canada. The products exported from Haiti are: manufactures, coffee, oils, cocoa, and mangos. The countries that Haiti imports from are the United States, Netherlands, Malaysia, and Colombia. The main products imported into Haiti are: food, manufactured goods, machinery and transport equipment, fuels, and raw materials.

Food

Haiti is plagued with severe poverty and hunger. Arable farmland is scarce and many fruit trees have been cut down for fuel. Most cooking is done over open fires or small ovens. When food is available, it is often rice, beans, and sorghum. These three grains are the staples of a Haitian diet. Another popular food due to the climate of Haiti is citrus fruits, such as pineapples, mangos, oranges, and grapefruit. Other crops grown are millet, bananas, coconut, almonds, peanuts, cassava, and corn. The majority of Haitian people rarely eat meat because of the high cost.

Landmarks

Many beautiful beaches make Haiti a popular spot for hundreds of tourists. Cruise ships often stop on the shores of Haiti, so passengers can enjoy a day of snorkeling, coastal boat rides, or sunbathing on the beach. If you are looking for a little history, you may want to venture into the country a bit. In downtown Port-au-Prince, the original murals of the first Haiti artists can be found inside the Holy Trinity Episcopalian church. The Iron Market features beautiful metallic construction dating back to Europe in 1889. Traveling up to the northern region, Cans Souci is home to the La Citadelle. This massive castle with walls 20 feet thick and 400 cannons has been called the Eighth Wonder of the World. The fortress took 20,000 slaves 13 years to complete. Also in this region is Les grottes du Dondon, which are caves where proof of pre-colombian civilization has been found. As tribute to the buccaneers that made Haiti their home in the 17th Century, tourists can visit Ile de la
Tortue, a famous hiding spot for pirates’ loot. On the southern border of Haiti lies the town of Jacmel. This was home to the first French colonists on the island. The area is full of beautiful waterfalls and caves.

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